

Before we launch into our first Homework Chapter, I wanted to provide a little bit of review and historical context for the second half of our Acts Study. In the upcoming weeks we will be focusing on Paul's missionary journeys and the spread of Gospel to the heart of the Roman Empire. The first half of the study was truly focused on the early church in Jerusalem and the spread of the Gospel first by the Hellenist believers and later by Peter. Acts chapters 11 and 12 are a turning point in Luke's narration as we shift from a Peter /Jerusalem centric story line to a Paul/Antioch/Journey storyline. This transition is marked by multiple scene shifts in these two chapters where we will be going back and forth from Peter's activities and the birth of the Antioch church. To establish a firm contextual grounding for our up coming homework, I wanted to take some time to review the time line of events in these chapters and to provide some historical information on a few of the significant people in these passages.

I'd like to define a few terms before we get started, in the hopes that it will make these passages a bit easier to follow:

Hellenist Jews	Jews of the Disapora, either residing now in Jerusalem or elsewhere in the Roman Empire. These are Jews were not raised in Israel.
Hebraic Jews	Jews of Israel. Their beliefs tend to be more conservative than the Hellenists. Among them are counted the Sadducees, Pharisees and the general people of Israel. Pharisees are known for their exclusivist and legalistic tendencies and a firm belief that their salvation is dependent upon their adherence to the law.
God-fearers	Gentiles who regularly attend synagogue, adhere to the Jewish faith but have not fully converted to Judaism. Cornelius of Acts 10 is a prime example.
Hellenist Believers	In Hellenist Jews who have come to faith in Jesus the Messiah. Tending not to be as legalist as the Hebraic Jews. Stephen and Philip come from this group.
Hebraic Believers	Hebraic Jews who have come to faith in Jesus the Messiah. This would include Peter, James, John, and the rest of the apostles.
Gentile Believers	Pagans or "God-fearers" from all over the Empire, residing in Israel or elsewhere who accept the Gospel message and become part of the church.

Within the Hebraic believers we have at least two main groups: First we have your average Hebraic Jewish believer who still values and lives with his Jewish traditions and

customs, recognizing their salvation comes by faith, but their Jewish traditions still hold an important part of their belief system. This would certainly include the apostles of the church. Then we have “The Circumcision Group” made up of ultra-conservative believers who adhere strongly to their Jewish traditions and customs, likely stemming from a Pharisaic tradition. While they believe salvation comes by faith in the saving work of the Messiah, they also believe their traditions and laws are an integral part of their salvation, not just their traditions. They believe that Gentiles who become believers should convert to Judaism before entering the fellowship.

In Acts 10, Peter had embarked on a missionary journey of his own, visiting some of the churches in the region west of Jerusalem, in particular the towns of Lydda, Joppa and Caesarea where he encounters Cornelius. It is there with Cornelius that he had his belief altering encounter with Cornelius and the Gentile Pentecost. It is not known how these churches were started, but quite possibly they had been visited if not started by Philip. After the stoning of Stephen we saw that many of the Hellenistic or Greek believers fled from Jerusalem as waves of persecution spread through the city. In fact the persecutions started the day of the stoning: *“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria”*(Acts 8:1). This persecution is what pushed the Hellenists out of Jerusalem and throughout Judea sharing the gospel. Chapter 8 tells of Phillip, one of the seven leaders of the Hellenist believers, taking the message to Samaria and then to Ethiopia. As the Hellenists start sharing the gospel in the synagogues throughout Judea, they were paving the way for the message to be accepted by Jews and God-fearers.

Acts 11 begins upon Peter’s return from his brief travels to Lydda, Joppa and Caesarea, where In Chapter 11 he stands before the elders of the Jerusalem church, comprised mainly of Hebraic believers.

## **Peter Explains his Actions to the Believers in Jerusalem**



### **Review Acts 11:1-18**

Upon his return from his travels, Peter returned to Jerusalem. *“The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.<sup>2</sup> So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him<sup>3</sup> and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them”* (Acts 11:1-3). The apostles and brothers throughout Judea heard that Gentiles received the Word of God. At this point in our time line, it is mainly and Hebraic believers like Peter, John and James that are still in Jerusalem, the Hellenist believers having been scattered elsewhere in the persecution. Although, it soon becomes evident that Peter and later John and James are not as stringent in their faith as others. The tensions with the “circumcised believers” are in reference to some of the more conservative

Hebraic Jews who have become believers. Their traditions are more stringent and legalistic. They still adhere to many of the laws and traditions of the Pharisees. These Hebraic believers come to be known as a faction called “the Circumcision Group”, they strongly believe that if a Gentile wants to become a Christian believer they must first convert to Judaism and undergo the full proselyte procedure which included circumcision. It is extremely difficult for these very conservative believers to believe or accept that Peter would defile himself by entering the home of or dining with a Gentile. The criticism directed at Peter seems to stem from this group. They have the strongest reservations with Gentiles being included in the kingdom. Their opposition and stance will become a difficult issue for the early church to contend with and will come up again in next week’s homework. Peter addresses their criticism with a recounting of what happened on his way to meet Cornelius and of his vision.

Peter has a dream of the Lord repeatedly telling him to eat all manner of foods even those things considered unclean according to Torah. That vision is the beginning of him coming to terms with God’s instruction not to call anything or *anyone* unclean that God has called clean. Peter is then brought to the home of “*Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly*”(Acts 10:1-2).

As we studied this passage previously it became clear that although Peter was brought there to share the gospel message – salvation through faith in Jesus who rose from the dead; it is also evident that he and his companions are there to witness something completely unexpected. Peter says down in Acts 11:15, “*As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.*”<sup>16</sup> *Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’*<sup>17</sup> *So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?”* (Acts 11:15-17). Notice what Peter says... “*As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.*” Luke’s original description of this event tells us the dramatic proof of the presence of the Holy Spirit: Acts 10:48 tells us that all who were assembled there were speaking in tongues and praising God, just as had transpired at the 1<sup>st</sup> Pentecost. Peter and his companions have been brought here to witness the coming of the Holy Spirit upon those assembled at the home of Cornelius is the Gentile Pentecost. This is a monumental change in the Jewish believers understanding of their faith. God had opened the door for the Gentiles to become part of the faith. There was no mistake or denying of what God so clearly demonstrated. God-fearing Gentiles received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and this gift was manifested in the speaking of tongues. They received the very same gift and its outward manifestation, as did the Jewish believers at Pentecost. Hence Peter’s conclusion: *So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?*(11:17). Peter’s words before the assembled church elders brought an end to the discussion, at least for the time being. It is very soon upon the heels of this event that Herod’s persecution of the Hebraic believers begins in Chapter 12, which we will get to momentarily.

## The Church in Antioch



Read Acts 11:19-21

Right in the middle of Act Chapter 11, Luke’s narrative takes a turn away from Peter’s activities in Jerusalem and segues to Antioch. *“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews” (Acts 11:19)*. The first thing we learn, looking at v.19, is that the persecutions after the death of Stephen have driven believers (Hellenists) as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch where they share the Gospel with only the Jews. But then we see a change in verse 20: *“Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:20)*. The Greeks here indicates Gentiles – they were already speaking to the Greek Jews as v. 19 tells us. Here, the very beginnings of the world-wide mission to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth commences as Gentiles, likely God-fearers in the synagogue, receive the message. If the term “Greeks” here referred to Hellenist Jews, it would be insignificant. The synagogues in Antioch, Cyprus and Phoenicia were filled with Hellenist or Greek Jews because these places are outside of Israel. If the Greeks mentioned here are not Jewish, but God-fearing Gentiles, this makes much more sense taking in consideration the concerns of the Jerusalem church in their interview with Peter and subsequent events related to James’ death and Peter’s arrest, and the response of the Jews to Herod’s persecution of the Believers in Acts chapter 12.

It is at this point that our homework will pick up in the Acts Narrative, so I won’t share anymore about the Antioch church. Just that it is significant to know it was started by Hellenist believers who escaped persecutions in Jerusalem and brought their faith with them, and the Greeks, or God-fearers were included in this ministry. Verse 21 attests to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the building of this church and its success. <sup>21</sup> *The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord”*

## Persecution of Jewish Believers



Acts 12:1-4, 17

While it appears that the apostles were left alone during the persecutions that followed Stephen’s death, things will change as Herod Agrippa rules Judea. Herod will turn his focus directly upon the leaders of the Jerusalem church, or as Acts 12:1 so succinctly describes, Herod *“laid violent hands”* on some of the Christians. As we saw in our concluding lesson last fall, Herod’s intention may have been to decimate the Jerusalem church, but even he could not stand against God, and suffered the consequences for his arrogance and cruelty.

It is believed that the events of James' martyrdom and Peter's arrest take place in the spring of either 42 or 43 AD. Verse 3 tells us it is the Feast of Unleavened Bread which is Passover. Passover falls in the spring, it is one of the three major Jewish Holy Days that requires Jewish men to travel to Jerusalem to make their offerings at the Temple. The day after Passover is the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread which is a week long holiday. Jerusalem would have been filled to overflowing with Jewish pilgrims from all over Judea, as well as the entire Roman Empire.

The Herod of which the scriptures speak is Herod Agrippa I. He was the grandson of Herod the Great. His Father Aristobolous had been killed by his own father, Herod the Great in 7 BC because Herod feared that his son was planning to usurp the throne. At this time Agrippa's mother took him to Rome and raised him there along with the Roman aristocracy. The relationships he would build in Rome eventually lead to him ruling over the Jewish kingdom. The emperor Caligula made him ruler over the Transjordan and the Decapolis – the region north of Galilee in 37 AD. Two years later Caligula gave him Galilee and Perea when Caligula exiled Agrippa's Uncle Antipas. When Claudius became emperor in 41 AD, he gave his former schoolmate Agrippa rule over Judea and Samaria which had previously been governed by procurators. Agrippa I was "King of the Jews" ruling over all of Judea, Samaria, Galilee, the Transjordan and the Decapolis, much the same territory as his infamous grandfather.

Agrippa's position was not necessarily a stable one. His power and authority were given him by Caligula, but Caligula was not a popular emperor among the Romans. He could not count on being in favor with Rome, therefore it was necessary for him to be in the good graces of the Jews and maintain stability at home. It is imperative that Agrippa's actions be viewed through the lens of his political position. Agrippa would do whatever it took to keep the Jews content with his rule. When he saw that the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem was pleased with James' arrest and subsequent death, it was natural he would next target Peter in his campaign of persecuting the Christians in Jerusalem. Doing so allowed him to curry favor of the influential Pharisees. It is not clear why the Jews in Jerusalem were against the Christians at this time, but likely had something to do with their acceptance of uncircumcised Gentiles like Cornelius among their ranks, as well as those in Antioch.

Agrippa's persecution of Christians began with the death of James. This James is the apostle and brother of John, the son of Zebedee. If James was executed "with the sword" according to Roman methods, he was beheaded. If it was according to the Jewish method, the sword would have been thrust through his body so as not to desecrate the body with at beheading. Luke does not provide much detail in James' execution; his focus was on God's miraculous deliverance of Peter.

As noted in verse 2, it is the week long Feast of Unleavened Bread and Agrippa is waiting until after the feast to hold a public trial before executing Peter (an apparent forgone conclusion of the trial). To do so during the feast would have been viewed by the Jews as a desecration of the Holy Days. Peter is held under heavy guard awaiting his trial and imminent execution. The rest of chapter 12 details his miraculous escape which we covered previously in

Lesson 5a. For our review we need to turn our focus on verse 17 which says, “*Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. Tell James and the brothers about this*” he said, and then he left for another place.”

First Peter recounts how the angel led him out of prison and to the doorstep of John Mark’s mother. Then he instructs them to “*Tell James and the brothers about this*” indicating it is James who will step into his position of authority in the Jerusalem church. So, if James the apostle is dead, which James is now taking the leadership of the Jerusalem church? James the brother of Jesus is mentioned in Mark 6:3. Paul mentions meeting with Peter and “*James the Lord’s brother*” in Galatians 1:19, and also citing him as one of the church’s “pillars” along with Peter and John in Galatians 2:9. Paul also mentions James the brother of Jesus as one of those to whom the risen Jesus appeared in 1 Corinthians 15:7. So there is quite strong evidence that the James here mentioned is the same James as the Lord’s brother. It is also to this James that the Epistle of James is attributed. James, after he faithfully served the church, would also face a martyr’s death. He was executed by order of the High Priest in AD 62.<sup>1</sup> We will see further evidence of James’ leadership of the church in chapter 15, where it is James who makes the ultimate decision on Gentile requirements for fellowship among the Jewish Christians.

And then we see that Peter “*left for another place*”. Peter departs Jerusalem leaving James (the brother of the Lord) in charge. Peter hid so effectively it is still unknown as to where he went. For whatever reason Luke did not disclose Peter’s hiding place, rather of more importance that Peter had to depart and go somewhere where he would be safe from Agrippa. He would later return to Jerusalem after Agrippa’s death. It is possible he traveled through Asia Minor at this time. 1 Peter 1:1 addresses churches in this region and in Galatians 2:11 Paul mentions Peter’s visit to Antioch.

This passage is the last in Acts that focuses on the Jerusalem church and Peter. We will visit the Jerusalem church briefly in Acts 15, but in relation to Paul’s missionary work in Asia Minor. From here we will leave Peter and James and follow Paul and Barnabus as they spread the Gospel first in Asia Minor, then Greece and eventually Rome.

---

<sup>1</sup> The martyrdom of James is related in Josephus, Antiquities 20.197-203. Evidently Ananus used the interim between the death of Festus and the arrival of the new procurator albinus as an opportunity to execute James. [Festus was the Governor before whom Paul would stand trial in Acts 25, putting James’ death some time after 59AD.] Josephus attests to the high reputation of James when he noted that the more law-abiding Jews sent a formal protest to Agrippa against Anuanus’s actions toward James.

For a later and more legendary account of James’s death, see the Tradition of Hegeisppus quoted in Eusebius, Hist. Eccl., 2.23, in which James was thrown from the pinnacle of the temple, stoned and finally beaten to death with a club. (NAC)